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THE  TIMES

Marcel Reich-Ranicki



Reich-Ranicki: his highly popular television show on literature ran for 13 years Rex Features

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Influential critic who was celebrated — or feared — throughout Germany for his trenchant views

Marcel Reich-Ranicki was an astonishing man, a Polish Jew steeped in German culture who survived the Warsaw Ghetto, worked for the Polish secret police, and went on to become West Germany's leading literary critic and most unlikely TV personality. Germans called him their literary Pope. An autodidact, in a land that reveres scholarship, he achieved fame and influence unimaginable in Britain.

With his beetling brow and brash voice, softened by a disarming wit and irresistible loquacity, he was something of a cult figure. There was his regular TV programme about books, *Das Literarische Quartett*, his bestselling autobiography and, underlying it all, a steady stream of acerbic articles for leading newspapers such as *Die Zeit* and, above all, the *Frankfurter Allgemeine*, where he was literary editor from 1973 to 1988.

He bubbled over with a passionate love of German classic drama and literature. Readers and viewers were flattered by the invitation to share his enthusiasm. In a land where most critics — academics in particular — tend to follow a cautious, conformist line, they were shocked and delighted by his iconoclasm. Reich-Ranicki cut through cant with a lively directness, “making literature seem fun” (as he put it), without ever coming down from his highbrow perch. In print or on television, he would tell distinguished authors and revered professors, “You’re talking utter rot!”

His approach earned him enemies aplenty, and there were highly public feuds with formidable writers such as Günter Grass and Martin Walser (who responded to criticism by portraying Reich-Ranicki controversially in a novel entitled *Death of a Critic*, which attracted accusations of anti-Semitism). Reich-Ranicki was heavily involved in debates over how the Germans viewed their recent history. Although he was not a religious believer, he took pride in being Jewish, and was on his guard against suspected prejudice.

He was born Marcel Reich to Jewish parents near Warsaw. After his father's business failed in 1929 the family moved to Berlin, where Marcel's mother had prosperous relatives. He received a German education; and his school's harsh discipline gave him, he recalled, a “fear of German barbarism”. However, his simultaneous discovery of Goethe, Schiller, Fontane and others marked him deeply — “I fell under the spell of German literature, of German music”. Even after the Nazis had taken power in 1933 he sided instinctively with those Jews who believed that anti-Semitism would be directed only at immigrants from the East, not at assimilated Germans. This alarming sense of the vulnerability of high culture to barbarism would remain with him, expressed with great poignancy in a recollection of his mother, the greatest influence on his young life: “To the end of her life, to the day she was gassed at Treblinka, she spoke faultless, and indeed elegant, German.”

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 In 1938 barbarism caught up with the young Marcel Reich in Berlin when he was woken one morning by a policeman and deported back to Poland, allowed to carry only five marks and a novel by Balzac. After the Nazi invasion of Poland he was confined to the Warsaw Ghetto, where his work for the Jewish Council and his translating skills gave him some privileges. Characteristically, he later remembered the defiant cultural life that persisted, especially music: “A smell of cabbage and turnips still hung about the place, but this did not bother anyone listening to Schubert or Brahms.” He noted, too, the awful poignancy of musicians taking their instruments with them as they were sent to Treblinka, in the forlorn hope that the Germans would not kill those who could make music. He had to watch his parents being selected for deportation — “I knew that I was seeing them for the last time” — and realised that he had to escape the Ghetto. With his wife, Tosia, whom he met just after her father committed suicide following an assault by German soldiers, he managed to bribe his way past the police and find a Polish couple who were prepared to shelter Jews. As his host put it: “Adolf Hitler, the most powerful man in Europe, has decreed: these two people shall die. And I, a small typesetter from Warsaw, have decided they shall live. Now we shall see who wins.”

Bolek the typesetter won. In 1944 the fugitive couple were liberated by the advancing Red Army, and Reich joined the Polish Army. He was swiftly transferred into censorship and propaganda activities. In 1945 he was recruited to work in the Polish foreign intelligence service and was posted to Berlin and London, where one of his main tasks was to spy on Polish émigrés, bitter enemies of the communist regime in Warsaw. For this posting he added “Ranicki” to his name, as it was thought that plain “Reich” would not create the right impression. He later portrayed this work as a kind of game, but when the relevant files were released after the end of Polish communist rule it appeared that he had been a rather more dedicated functionary than he had liked to imply.

He had certainly joined the Communist Party, which he saw as representing both a “refuge” and “safety” after the perils of the war. However, on his return to Warsaw in 1949 he was caught up in Stalinist in-fighting and he left the secret service and began work in publishing, translating and criticism. He was imprisoned briefly, expelled from the party and, at times, banned from publishing his writing, though at other times he published works with the required number of approving mentions of Stalin. Later in the 1950s, as the political situation eased somewhat, he began to establish links with the German literary world. He met prominent figures including Bertolt Brecht, whom he described with what would become a trademark asperity. “I had the impression that he was always acting,” he recalled, and noted that Brecht failed to share the scarce fruit supplied to his Warsaw hotel room and appeared to have his “proletarian” suits cut from the finest English cloth.

Contacts with West German writers, especially Heinrich Böll and Siegfried Lenz, helped when Reich-Ranicki and his wife and son managed to emigrate to West Germany in 1958. Early contacts with the influential Gruppe 47 literary circle helped to speed his way into the profession of newspaper critic and radio broadcaster. His forthright style rapidly proved popular with readers and listeners. “In order to make what I wished to say understandable, I frequently took the liberty of exaggerating and oversimplifying,” was his candid admission. In 1973 his place in the West German cultural establishment was secured when he became director of the literary section of the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*.

He enjoyed great influence now, though some found his approach too egocentric and quarrelsome. Most authors, he said, “understand no more about literature than birds do about ornithology”. There were regular feuds, such as with Joachim Fest, the distinguished historian and biographer of Hitler, who as one of the *Frankfurter Allgemeine*'s publishers had been a close colleague. Reich-Ranicki was disturbed when Fest invited him to a party at which Albert Speer, once one of Hitler's closest confidants, was present. He was furious when Fest published without consulting him an essay by the revisionist historian Ernst Nolte, which set in motion the so-called *Historikerstreit*. Nolte argued against the uniqueness of the Holocaust, seeing it as a kind of defensive response to the horrors of Bolshevik Russia.

Reich-Ranicki was also disturbed by a speech given by the novelist Martin Walser in 1998 which warned of the danger of “instrumentalising Auschwitz”. He had previously praised Walser's work but he saw this speech as giving succour to Germany's far Right. A few years later Walser published a novel, *Death of a Critic*, describing the apparent murder of a Jewish literary critic, André Ehrl-König. The novel was seen by many as an anti-Semitic personal attack on Reich-Ranicki.

Another bitter dispute was with Günter Grass. Reich-Ranicki had first met him in the 1950s, and had initially been highly dismissive of Grass's early work, including *The Tin Drum* — a judgment which embarrassed him when the novel became such a success. Hostilities were resumed in 1995 when Grass brought out *Ein Weites Feld* (A Broad Field), his novelistic response to German reunification. Reich-Ranicki dismissed the book's characters as dull ciphers for Grass's polemical purposes, and accused him of naivety in his comparisons of the allegedly threatening new Germany with what had gone before, especially in the GDR. What really enraged Grass, however, was a photo of Reich-Ranicki on the front cover of *Der Spiegel* in what Grass called the “repulsive act” of ripping up his novel.

Reich-Ranicki had perhaps been tempted into such sensational gestures by his television fame, which soared after he was approached in the late 1980s with an offer to host a regular programme about literature. He was astonished when executives agreed to his insistence that the programme, *Das Literarische Quartett*, should be modelled on a seminar, with just four participants, and consist solely of over an hour of conversation about five books. The subject matter may have been highbrow but the lively, opinionated style proved highly popular. The programme significantly influenced book sales, and ran from 1988 until 2001.

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At the height of his fame in 1999 Reich-Ranicki published his autobiography, *Mein Leben*, which was a bestseller in Germany and was published in Britain as *The Author of Himself*.

Debate persisted in Germany as to how durable Reich-Ranicki's influence would be beyond the showmanship and the search for dramatic effect in his pronouncements on writers and their works. What he had certainly achieved was to bring literary debate into the mainstream, helping to rescue it from the deadening effects of academic tradition. He had also helped to revive the reputation of the German language itself, whose appalling perversion under Nazism and communism had led to such loss of cultural self-confidence.

His wife, Tosia, died in 2011. He is survived by their son Andrew Alexander, a mathematics professor in Edinburgh.

Marcel Reich-Ranicki, literary critic, was born on June 2, 1920. He died on September 18, 2013, aged 93

3 comments



Mr Andrew Ranicki

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Christopher Gillibrand

16 hours ago

A brilliant obit. There were only two literary critics in the world- Marcel Reich-Ranicki and all the others. Now we are left with all the others. However, it misses his most provocative act- the turning down live on TV the Deutschen Fernsehpreis- German TV Prize for lifetime achievement. He said TV produced nothing worthwhile. The audience made up of the entire German media establishment were nothing if not shocked.

Recommend Reply



Ross

18 hours ago

Marcel Reich-Ranicki was an erudite and entertaining speaker, but he was on every German talk show for decades. which was a bit excessive. If you never saw him, picture Malcolm Muggeridge.

Recommend Reply

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